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PM warns of second wave in winter

We can't afford to make the same mistakes twice

ON Sunday, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina warned that the Covid-19 situation will likely deteriorate in the upcoming winter, and urged all involved to prepare for another outbreak in wintertime. Experts around the world have predicted that winter will exacerbate the spread of Covid-19, and there are widespread fears—and evidence to support such fears—that the second wave will be even worse than the first. Europe is already in the middle of a second wave as it moves into winter, after having brought down the number of infections and deaths in the first wave, and daily case numbers in the EU have reached record highs of more than 45,000 on a 14-day notification rate, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). If these numbers and predictions say anything at all, it's that there's no room for complacency, as we prepare for what promises to be a drawn-out battle.

Unfortunately, the government's response from the beginning of the pandemic has been one of denial, at worst, and complacency, at best. Over the past months, we have relaxed most Covid-19 measures, including allowing transport to operate at full capacity, despite the fact that our positivity rate remains well above the global average and that of our neighbouring countries, including India and Pakistan. Worse still, we have reduced the number of tests in the country and made them inaccessible to the masses by slapping a fee on them. The Covid-19 testing expansion policy is still in its draft stages, after months of negotiations between different departments of the health ministry. Meanwhile, there are talks of reopening schools in the immediate future, amidst fears that implementing safety measures proposed by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education will simply not be possible in a vast majority of educational institutions in the country.

Less than a month ago, the health minister himself said that "Bangladesh will be coronavirus-free very soon" and added that he didn't think "we'll even need vaccines." Comments such as this, coupled with contradicting measures from the government, have confused the public as well, who are no longer taking the precautions that they ought to as they engage in social and economic activities and risk increasing the rate of community transmission.

Under the circumstances, the prime minister's warning should be taken with the utmost seriousness by policymakers and the public. We need to revisit the shortcomings of our healthcare system and prepare it for a second outbreak, checking corruption at every stage and learning from past mistakes. We need to prepare now if we are to mitigate the repercussions of another outbreak as well as another economic decline.

We failed to take advantage of early warnings the first time around; we cannot afford to do the same if a second wave comes.

Hillocks ravaged in Sylhet under the guise of night

Officials must not turn a blind eye

A recent report published in this daily sheds light on the serious environmental disaster brewing across Sylhet. In order to meet the high demand for flat land in the race for urbanisation, hillock cutting runs rampant, despite the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995 (amended 2010), which strictly prohibits the cutting or razing of any types of hills and hillocks by any individual or institution. Moreover, the High Court had banned cutting of any types of hillock in Sylhet. Yet, in order to meet the mounting demand for plain land, hillock owners task contractors to raze down the hills, which usually takes place in the dead of the night to avoid attention.

Although there are dedicated government officials to keep vigilance over such matters, one can only imagine why they turn a blind eye to such illegal activities. What's more shocking is that during one incident, the excavator of Sylhet City Corporation was used to cut the hillock by the brother of a councillor, who was later fined. Although DoE conducts drives now and then, they just end up fining the culprits. Such fines only serve as a mild reprimand, as the "profits" made—prices of the land increase by four to five times—far surpass the fine. Fines are simply not enough. Why aren't the actual owners being arrested? They must be punished in an exemplary manner for defying the laws set forth.

Too much damage has been done already. The authorities have been silent for too long. They need to come out of their slumber and hold those responsible to account, unless we are to believe that they, too, are complicit in these crimes.

The above incident highlights the audacity of the owners and their cohorts in carrying out such crimes with impunity. In order to keep the remaining hillocks from being razed, the laws must be implemented thoroughly and authorities concerned should strictly monitor the areas to ensure they are protected at all times from being razed.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Take action against syndicates

Capitalising on the demand of the general consumer and increasing the price by reducing the supply of goods in the market in the hope of extra profits has been going on for a long time. Even in the early stages of lockdown, low quality products were being sold at high prices.

Unscrupulous traders are able to destabilise the market like this due to the absence of regular supervision. Although much has been said about getting rid of the syndicates, so far, we have not seen any meaningful results. Unless the government takes stern action against such corrupt traders, their illegal activities will not stop.

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ABU AFSARUL HAIDER

of earning and have become jobless, billionaires are getting richer than ever before.

According to a report published by the Washington-based think tank, Institute for Policy Studies and Clearwater, in the United States (US), 40 million Americans filed for unemployment during the pandemic, but billionaires have become richer to the tune of USD 565 billion in three months since March. The report further revealed that, from March to June 2020, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos saw his wealth rise by an estimated USD 48 billion. Eric Yuan, the founder of the video-conferencing platform Zoom, has amassed a fortune of over USD 17 billion, and former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer's net worth increased by USD 15.7 billion. The wealth of Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook has also been growing and he became USD 9.1 billion richer this year.

It's not just only in the United States, we see the same trend pretty much everywhere. Take, for example, China. While its economy has shrunk by 6.8 percent in the first quarter of 2020 compared to a year earlier, some Chinese billionaires saw their wealth rising during the pandemic. Wang Xing, who co-chairs

World leaders must control inequality, not because the rich have much more than the poor, but because if this trend continues, citizens can lose confidence in institutions that can destroy moral conscience and fracture social fabric.



SHASHI THAROOR

to account.

Parliament is obliged to meet now, because India's constitution limits the gap between sessions to six months, and the Covid-19 pandemic has forced all sessions to be suspended since March. With 4.5 million cases to date, India is now the world's second worst-affected country, surpassing Brazil and Russia and behind only the United States.

Moreover, infection rates are rising, especially in rural areas where testing had not been adequately extended earlier. Fortunately, the Covid-19 mortality rate remains relatively low, at 55 per million people, representing just 1 percent of deaths from all causes.

But if lives have not ended, livelihoods have, owing to draconian but ineffective lockdowns introduced in March. GDP collapsed by 23.9 percent year on year in April-June, making India the world's worst-performing major economy. Unemployment is rife—some 21 million salaried jobs have been lost during the pandemic, and millions more in the informal sector, especially among day laborers, who are now unable to make ends meet. Small and micro enterprises are being shuttered throughout the country. And the millions of migrant workers who trudged home in despair during the lockdown have found themselves no better off in their home villages' stagnant economies.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government seems utterly helpless to stop the economic meltdown, as if paralysed by the plummeting indicators in every sector. A much-hyped fiscal stimulus turned out to be less than one-tenth of the size that Modi had claimed, and failed to alleviate nationwide distress. The budget adopted just before the lockdowns is in tatters, its every assumption rendered irrelevant.

Meituan Dianping, one of the world's largest on-demand delivery services, saw his wealth grow by USD 11.6 billion since the beginning of 2020. Pony Ma, founder and CEO of Tencent, saw his wealth jump from USD 6.8 billion to USD 46.4 billion, Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba, recorded a USD 3 billion rise in wealth and Pang Kang, chairman of Foshan Haitian Flavouring & Food Co., recorded a rise of USD 11.7 billion during the pandemic. Similarly, while about 84 percent of Indian households lost their jobs or incomes, and millions were pushed back into poverty, billionaires like Mukesh Ambani, chairman of the Reliance group, Dilip Shanghvi of Sun Pharma, Reddy family of Dr Reddy's Laboratories, PV Ramprasad Reddy of Aurobindo Pharma, Murali K Divi of Divi's Laboratories, YK Hamied of Cipla etc. have doubled their net worth during the pandemic.

Now, one of the most perplexing question most people ask is at a time of



enormous economic pain and suffering, and despite businesses being shut and the economy slowing down, how are the rich getting richer? Before answering it, let me make one thing very clear, the "rich getting richer" is not an anomaly, but rather a long-term trend of the capitalist economy, where the rich have the most advantageous position. And the pandemic has accelerated that trend and helped further boost the fortunes of some billionaires. It is true, because of dramatic shifts in consumer behaviour due to the global pandemic, some companies specialising in tech, food delivery, online grocery shopping, etc., have seen soaring revenue growth. But there is more to it than.

Today, most countries of the world are ruled by a system called "Corporatocracy". Under this system, only a handful of super-powerful corporations and big companies have become the dominant force that essentially controls

governments by donating huge amounts of money to political campaigns, to office holders and political candidates. By controlling governments, they shape policies and agendas to better support their own interests and their investors. Unfortunately, they are the ones who control every facet of our lives and are setting the rules of the world that we live in.

Take, for instance, in this global crisis, governments around the world have offered various stimulus packages worth billions of dollars to save the people and businesses, but if you take a closer look, you can actually see that most of the money has disproportionately gone to the wealthiest corporations and individuals. For example, in United States, The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, also known as the CARES Act, enacted in late March 2020, announced USD 2.3 trillion dollar aid package to assist households and

employers of all sizes. But different media reports suggest that over half of this aid package was acquired by big businesses. The report also confirms that there are a series of provisions in the act which provide vastly bigger benefits to the rich, to corporations and to a handful of ultra-rich people.

Today, the global economic system is rigged in favour of the rich and big corporations who have an absolute advantage over common people. While millions have lost their jobs and thousands are suffering daily, they have taken advantage of the pandemic to increase their wealth and power. In the US, the Federal Reserve's data shows that the wealthiest top 10 percent of American households own about 84 percent of all US stocks. After an initial crash in the early stages of the pandemic, rallying on promises of assistance from the Federal Reserve, the markets quickly rebounded and are now hovering at close to record

highs. The stock market is another reason why the richest Americans accumulate wealth very quickly.

There isn't any data available yet to show who became rich during the pandemic in Bangladesh, but I will give you a clue. On March 2020, the main index of the Dhaka Stock Exchange was below 4,000 points. It has since bounced back due to some good measures taken by the authorities and as of September 17, 2020 DSEX index closed at 5,104 points. Meanwhile share prices of some companies almost doubled in the last three months.

It is now widely believed that the burdens of the pandemic have fallen to a greater extent on people at the low end of the income spectrum and is contributing to further widening of the income inequality between the richest and the poorest in many parts of the world. According to the latest Oxfam report, the world's 2,153 billionaires have more wealth than the 4.6 billion people who make up 60 percent of the planet's population. Oxfam's report added another shocking statistic. The report claims that the world's billionaires are growing USD 2.5 billion richer every day, while the poorest half of the population are seeing their net worth dwindle.

Rebecca Gowland, Oxfam Head of Inequality Campaign and Policy, said: "The fact that the world's richest billionaires are massively increasing their wealth at a time when millions are facing hardship, is evidence of a broken economy. It is unconscionable that a handful of super-rich men are stockpiling wealth while millions of people around the world are losing their jobs, struggling to put food on the table and are living in fear of destitution."

"Extreme inequality was already trapping millions of people around the world in poverty and now half a billion more people could be pushed into poverty due to the pandemic." Gowland added: "If we are to rebuild a fairer world, one which doesn't continue to just reward rich men, governments need to tax wealth fairly and crack down on tax havens and loopholes that cost both rich and poor countries countless billions in tax revenue every year."

Therefore, world leaders must control inequality, not because the rich have much more than the poor, but because if this trend continues, citizens can lose confidence in institutions that can destroy moral conscience and fracture social fabric, which in turn, destabilise political systems and hinder the functioning of democracy.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

India's Silenced Parliament

As if all this weren't bad enough, a major crisis has erupted on the country's disputed border with China, where 20 Indian soldiers were brutally killed in June in the icy Himalayan heights of Ladakh. Talk of disengagement has failed to translate into withdrawals, and both sides have sent reinforcements to the tenuous Line of Actual Control that divides their forces. This week, the two countries' foreign ministers announced a new agreement to disengage, although it remains to be seen whether this will be

cramped chambers, with MPs distributed throughout the upper and lower houses and the visitors' galleries.

As a result, the two houses will take turns meeting for a half-day each in sessions lasting four hours instead of the usual six, and on all seven days of the week rather than the traditional five. Worse, the government and the presiding officers have decided that, given the shorter sessions, they will dispense with Question Hour, the only opportunity for MPs to demand unscripted answers from



A photo from March 3, 2020, shows Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (centre) and other politicians during a BJP parliamentary committee meeting at the Parliament House in New Delhi.

PHOTO: AFP

realised.

Meanwhile, Pakistan has stepped up its cross-border militancy in Kashmir, which is seething with unrest following last year's clampdown by Modi's government. Many increasingly fear that India may be facing a two-front war before the year is out.

All this should normally make for a lively parliamentary session. But the legislature will itself meet in abnormal and straitened circumstances, reflected in the extraordinary measures announced in advance of the session. No MP may enter the premises without a Covid-negative certificate from a test administered within three days of the session. Inside, social distancing will apply in the usually

ministers on a variety of subjects. (In response to the outcry, the government has agreed to accept written questions two weeks in advance, to which ministers will provide written answers.)

Suspending Question Hour is typical of a government that abhors being questioned. Modi has not held a single press conference in India in his six years in office, and is notorious for granting interviews only when the questions are pre-approved. Protesters questioning the government in the streets are charged with sedition, and critics are denounced as anti-national. A prominent lawyer who tweeted his objections to recent Supreme Court decisions was convicted of criminal contempt. And the mainstream

news media, far from interrogating the government's performance, has recently been fixated on the lurid details of a Bollywood actor's suicide and the conspiracy theories swirling around it.

In the meantime, the government stumbles on and tries to mask its ineptitude with a variety of public-relations stunts, including a bizarre recent photoshoot of Modi feeding peacocks in his garden. The official response to failure is denial, as with Modi's recent claim that India had lost no territory to China, despite satellite pictures and evidence on the ground that clearly indicate otherwise.

China has gleefully seized on this statement to deny that it has encroached on over a thousand square kilometres (386 square miles) of land. China's leaders are not the first to realise that they can get away with anything with this Indian government, as long as Modi can claim victory at home.

Parliament therefore has a vital job on its hands, but many MPs fear that it will be unable to do it. The government will use its crushing majority to pass the bills it wants, particularly those converting a dozen ordinances or executive orders issued during the last six months into law, while sidestepping debate on the issues that matter.

The government's tendency to use its parliamentary majority as a rubber stamp was already apparent in previous sessions. And this session could be cut short at any sign of Covid-19—one MP has died from it since March.

The visible measures necessitated by the pandemic—face masks, greater distance between MPs, and plastic partition screens—may not be all that is different about this parliamentary session. I fear that our democracy's highest legislative body will be reduced to a noticeboard for government decisions. There is a genuine risk that while India will honour the outward forms of parliamentary process, the spirit of debate, discussion, disagreement, and deliberation will be missing.

Shashi Tharoor, a former UN under-secretary-general and former Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and Minister of State for Human Resource Development, is an MP for the Indian National Congress.

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